

VZCZCXRO0546
OO RUEHFL RUEHKW RUEHLA RUEHNP RUEHROV RUEHSR
DE RUEHSI #0024/01 0061450
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
O 061450Z JAN 09
FM AMEMBASSY TBILISI
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 0669
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TBILISI 000024

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/25/2018
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [GG](#)
SUBJECT: GEORGIA: RUMORS, MANEUVERING, AND ELECTIONS

Classified By: AMBASSADOR JOHN F. TEFFT. REASONS: 1.4 (B) AND (D).

¶1. (C) Summary/Comment: Well informed International Republican Institute Country Director, Dmitry Shashkin (strictly protect) has passed on several far fetched but widely circulated rumors in Tbilisi alleging a US or EU engineered plot to oust President Saakashvili in the spring. While the likelihood of pre-term elections currently exists as a possibility mainly in the minds of the opposition, the rumors are impacting the opposition and have likely delayed any more political consolidation until late next year. If spring passes without elections, Shashkin believes various opposition leaders face stark choices about their political futures. Others, notably Irakli Alasania seem to be taking a longer view, trying to line up support for the Presidential race in 2013. However, Shashkin contends that Alasania may ultimately suffer from unrealistically high expectations among supporters to do something immediately. End Summary/Comment.

OPPOSITION IN A PANIC - RUMORS A PLENTY

¶2. (C) Shashkin told us that Giorgi Targamadze (Christian Democratic Movement (CDM) Leader) and Levan Vepkhvadze (Deputy Speaker, CDM) approached him recently about rumors of upcoming Georgian elections precipitated by either President-Elect Obama or Ambassador Tefft (on behalf of Obama) demanding President Saakashvili's resignation. Shashkin assured them that was not in anybody's plans. Shashkin said the CDM was concerned they would be caught flat-footed if snap elections were held. Targamadze also relayed to Shashkin alternative theories involving Saakashvili's ouster; the CIA would remove Saakashvili and install Alasania as President; or the EU Commission headed by Heidi Tagliavini will demand that Saakashvili resign or face a Hague tribunal. In spite of their apparent absurdity, all theories share a common theme ending with Saakashvili's ouster. Shashkin who is in constant contact with all the players among the opposition says the non-parliamentary opposition is becoming more and more insular and divorced from reality. Targamadze told Shashkin that he had heard the various theories from the New Rights party. Shashkin has not heard this directly nor can affix blame to any particular party or individual for starting these rumors but says New Rights, Republicans, and Burjanadze's people are happily pushing them to those who will listen.

¶3. (C) Shashkin acknowledges the popularity of conspiracy theories among political chattering classes; nevertheless, he says the non-parliamentary opposition is getting increasingly desperate. Shashkin confirms what we have been hearing from other sources, that the non-parliamentary opposition is taking on an almost religious belief that some outside force will intervene to remove Saakashvili from office. Putting stock in conspiracy scenarios seems to confirm that the non-parliamentary opposition hears what we are also hearing, that Saakashvili has no intention whatsoever to call for new elections on his own. Shashkin believes the non-parliamentary opposition will soon have to face the reality that elections will not happen and then make some painful decisions. As long as there is a remote possibility

of elections, the current makeup of the non-parliamentary opposition will not coalesce into a larger movement. If spring passes with no elections, Shashkin sees a number of parties folding. Shashkin specifically mentioned New Rights and is dubious about Burjanadze, Republicans and others because they simply have shown no willingness to do the work because they simply have shown no willingness to do the work it takes to build and maintain a party in the absence of pending elections.

14. (C) Shashkin expressed doubts that David Gamkrelidze, David Usupashvili, or Nino Burjanadze are able to receive any sort of realistic message at the moment. He recounted that rather than view focus group results as a tool to improve ones image and message, they generally argue with the results. On the contrary, Shashkin organized a focus group for Giorgi Targamadze after Targamadze started to show a tendency to listen only to opinion that flattered him. Shashkin said the group was more harsh than Shashkin thought was fair but Targamadze, though clearly hurt from the comments, thanked Shashkin for the lesson he learned. Shashkin said the only opposition group that really listens to advice is the CDM. Shashkin said that Nino Burjanadze rejected campaigning door to door out of hand and was happy focus groups described her as a "queen". Shashkin said it was a bit uncomfortable to explain that being described as a "queen" was not a positive. Shashkin believes that even if new elections were held, Saakashvili and/or UNM would win handily.

ALASANIA GOES LONG?

15. (C) Commenting on the recent visit to Georgia by former

TBILISI 00000024 002 OF 002

Georgian Ambassador to the UN, Irakli Alasania, Shashkin said that Alasania's recent press conference was not a great performance. Alasania, however, had to say something due to all the buzz around him created by the Tbilisi political elite. Shashkin says many in the elite circles view him as "Santa Claus" hoping he can deliver new elections without Saakashvili's participation. Shashkin says Alasania is "green" as a politician, and thinks he should have waited until this summer to announce his move to the opposition. With a delayed announcement, Alasania could have avoided injecting himself into the political fray right after the war and would have a clearer picture as to the lay of the political landscape after election talk dies down. Shashkin said Saakashvili moved former MPs and potential defectors to Alasania, Lasha Zhvania and Nika Rurua to cabinet positions to up the ante on them and forestall developing any political momentum on Alasania's part. Now if Zhvania and Rurua leave, they will be completely outside of government which significantly changes the risk/reward analysis and denies them and Alasania a Parliamentary platform.

16. (C) Shashkin is circumspect about Alasania's near term political future. He clearly views him as a talented, capable individual but notes that the transition to the political arena is more difficult than most think. It appears Alasania wants to take a longer term approach but is hedging his bets in the event of snap elections. He has been approaching "second tier" MPs and being careful not to rock the boat to build a support base. Shashkin says he's been told that Alasania has provisional financial backing from Irakli Baidashvili (GMT Group which owns both the Marriott hotels among other businesses). Alasania is being careful not to alienate anybody in the opposition because of the possibility of early elections, but is wary of attaching himself to any particular opposition figure in the absence of elections. Thus, Alasania has put himself in a difficult position which has been heightened by sky high expectations for him among some of the opposition and Tbilisi's political class.

WHO IS THE NEXT PRESIDENT?

17. (C) Apart from the usual cast of characters, Shashkin views Parliamentary Speaker David Bakradze as possibly emerging from the UNM as a standard bearer in the next Presidential elections. While many commentators feel the UNM will break up without Saakashvili at the helm, Bakradze could emerge as a successor. Shashkin says he is smart, independent, and works well both within his party and outside of it. Shashkin says he's seen a shift among rank and file UNM MPs who more and more view Bakradze as a leader. Shashkin also mentioned that President Saakashvili met with Bakradze privately in Qatar right before announcing his recent cabinet shift. Bakradze is a well versed policymaker, but now Saakashvili appears to be seeking his advice on politics as well as policy. If he gains Saakashvili's support and can unify at least a portion of the UNM behind him, Bakradze could be a formidable presidential candidate. Another candidate who may be thinking about throwing his hat in the ring is Foreign Minister Grigol Vashadze. However, until it becomes clear to all that Saakashvili will serve out his full term, candidates from the UNM will likely remain mum on any future intentions.

TEFFT